

We are continuing in our Winter sermon series today called ‘Rooted & Growing,’ looking at the ways that Scripture uses the language of a tree, or branch, or vine, or other related image to speak specifically about Christ, and thereby drawing us back into the important reality of being rooted in *Christ* and growing in *Him*.

Because if Christ is not at the center, then we won’t actually be rooting ourselves in Him but we’ll be rooting ourselves in something else. That stability in Christ will not be there.

If our root system or foundation isn’t on the Rock that is Jesus, isn’t grafted into the Root that is Jesus, then flourishing in our Christian pilgrimage will be a bit of a challenge.

The apostle Paul wrote these words in Colossians 2:6-7: *“So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.”*

In other words, living our lives *in Him* requires a rootedness in Christ, a kind of depth in relationship. Because it’s those deep roots that define the kind of growth that we experience.

And our passage for this morning gives us yet another way that we can deepen ourselves in this metaphor. **Zechariah 3:1-10.**

So at this point in Israel’s history, the nation of Israel is no longer a nation. They are a scattered people in exile trying to regroup themselves. The Persians have taken over from the Babylonians, and a man named King Darius is on the throne.

During his reign, there was a prophet named Zechariah who received a number of prophetic visions that specifically spoke to the Lord’s desire to return to His people and for the people, then, to rebuild their ruined temple. Because in the ancient way of thinking, you needed to have a Temple in order to have a God. God’s inhabited temples—that’s how it worked.

This is precisely why God is not inviting them to rebuild the city, or a palace, or a wall. In other words, this isn’t an encouragement to regain a sense of national security and reattain what they think is rightfully theirs. They are to prepare themselves for God’s coming.

Because He is planning to come *regardless* of whether they are a nation unto themselves or not. In other words, God *does not want His people to be a people who seek to possess power.*

Look at the vision of Jerusalem in 2:3: *“Run, tell that young man, Jerusalem will be a city without walls because of the great number of people and animals in it. And I myself will be a wall of fire around it, declares the LORD, and I will be its glory within.”*

A city without walls was something unheard of in the ancient world. Because it made a people incredibly vulnerable. If Israel has no military strength or national security, it has no protection.

But a city without walls, in this case, is metaphorical language for what we talked about last week: the nations being welcomed into the city. God is coming, and the people are to prepare for His coming—but His coming is *not just for them*.

Because the nations are coming to seek out *this* God. Part of the hope that is being presented here is that there *is* and *will be* reason for the whole world to seek out *this* God.

Because look at what happens next. This same figure that Zechariah is seeing shows him how the Lord intends to accomplish this. And again, He doesn't give Zechariah images of chariots and horses, military defeats, a big fancy Kingdom.

The figure shows Zechariah an image of Joshua the high priest, a historical figure in Israel's history, standing before the Lord. And satan is there accusing him.

Why? Because His clothes are filthy, which is a strange image because the garments of the high priest were always assumed to be holy. Everything the high priest wore from the hat to the tassels was intentionally used for holy purposes and added glory and beauty to the priestly office.

But this vision is revealing to Zechariah that even the priestly garments do not cover the stains of sin and brokenness. Even the 'holy' status of the priest and the 'holy' tasks that they were called to do was not enough to make them holy or sinless.

This vision was a huge revelation, revealing not only the depth of human sin and brokenness but also the fact that *even the holiest of individuals can't escape it*. Joshua's clothes are soiled beyond imagination, and he can't do anything about it. He can't attain a more holy position or wear holier clothes—it won't make a difference.

And so Joshua is being appropriately accused here by the 'satan' or the adversary. Even as a priest, he's not holy enough to stand before God. He never has been.

But then, in a sudden turn of events, the Lord rebukes satan. Because look at what He does.

He *re-clothes* Joshua. When Joshua was dressed in his own clothes, satan had something to accuse him of. But the Lord commands His angels to strip Joshua of the soiled clothing and put on new ones, from top to bottom, a sign of the Lord imparting righteousness on Joshua that is not his own.

This is something totally new. It's a new step in the story of salvation—a new revelation for God's people—that the 'hope' of the sacrificial system did not actually lead to true or complete healing.

Because of what happens here to Joshua, he and his priestly colleagues are now going to be a symbol of what is yet to come. Because verse 8, "*I am going to bring my servant, the Branch.*"

The Servant Branch. Not the mighty oak. Not even a fig tree. Through a Branch, God's eyes will see the entire land, a new inscription will be written—perhaps this is alluding to the new covenant—and God "*will remove the sin of this land in a single day.*"

In other words, what God just did with Joshua is what He intends to do with everyone, *through this Branch*. Which means that this is a pretty powerful branch. A branch who brings complete peace and wellness—which is what the image of sitting under a vine and fig tree is about.

Very similar to the 'shoot' that we looked at last week growing out of the stump, a branch is a metaphor that implies new growth. It is a new arm of God's salvation plan.

It's an image of hope in the midst of desperate circumstances. Here in Zechariah's vision, the 'servant Branch,' a small twig perhaps, is God's chosen instrument for allowing His people to be re-rooted in Him and experience growth in a totally new way.

How? By removing their stained clothes and re-clothing them with purity. They will no longer be 'rooted' in their own attempts at being righteous but will rather be rooted in *His* righteousness.

Which—as you perhaps know—has *massive* implications. Because if the Branch, the instrument of new growth, accomplishes all of this, then what need is there for an earthly temple?

In fact, according to chapter 6:12, the Branch Himself will re-build the temple (John 2:19)—Christ actually becomes the Temple—and serves as a King *and* Priest who advocates for *all* of His people. He will do what God just did for Joshua, but on a global scale.

And what this means is that the people of God will no longer need to 'manage' their brokenness by trying to mask it with human ideas of holiness. Because there is no measuring stick that keeps track of how soiled your clothing is versus mine. There is no scale that weights how much baggage I hold compared to you.

All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. There is no Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female, because we are all one. We all stand before Christ equally. And our brokenness is not just partially resolved but is *fully healed* by the righteousness and holiness of God Himself who dresses our wounds and offers *true* healing.

Folks, this has *already happened in Jesus*. And we have to get this, because it changes everything, for everyone. In a deeply broken world, this is the only solution and true message of hope that there is.

A few days ago, I read an article that was all about the famous American artist, Thomas Kinkade. And if you haven't come across his work before, here's an example. He famously called himself the 'Painter of Light' because much of his work was in painting these idyllic and Eden-like images.

He was an incredibly talented artist, but he received a lot of criticism for creating art that seemed very kitschy and hollow. It was mass produced and without meaning or thought. It wasn't connected to reality; it was very sugary and forgettable, etc.

But what his family discovered—and a recently documentary about his life gets into all this—was that after Kinkade had passed away from alcohol poisoning when he was only 54, there was a stack of paintings found in a vault that uncovered the interior life and pain that the artist had been hiding from the public—and from everyone—all those years.

A shack in the middle of nowhere on a murky night; a nun pointing a gun at herself; war machines set against the backdrop of a city on fire. Distorted and confused faces. Paintings that seemed to express a kind of fear or rage that reflected a very broken soul.

Paintings that many of his former critics are claiming to be very good. And the director states that her main hope was to re-humanize Kinkade and encourage the viewers to resist the cultural temptation to dehumanize and rather treat one another with nuance and compassion.

Because apparently Kinkead had been raised in a home with a single mother, and only on the rare occasion would see his violent father. The home was always cold and dark, because they never had enough money to keep the heat and lights on, and never had a single portrait or painting posted anywhere.

In other words, what Kinkade spent his life painting for the public was what he never had. But because his paintings were idealized and depicting a false reality that didn't match his own inner turmoil, Kinkade ended up selling himself—in the pursuit of the love and affection of the American public—to a false identity. He was hiding the pain and the brokenness in order to be marketable.

Although the idealism is beautiful, escapism is never a true source of healing—as if we can just cover up our brokenness with our own efforts to find light. But neither is over-emphasizing the pain and darkness. Because although his 'hidden' paintings held more truth and reality, those didn't bring healing either.

What he needed, perhaps, was to paint a shack in the middle of nowhere with a small candle shining a light through the window. What he needed, perhaps, was to paint a nun holding a gun to herself but with a loved one running towards her in the background. What he needed, perhaps, was to paint a monster or distorted face with a small sapling reflecting in its eyes.

What he—and what everyone who lives in this broken world—needs is not a depletion of hope or exaggerated hope but *real* hope. Signs of God's mysterious power at work in unexpected ways.

Signs and messages of hope that—as Jesus reminds us over and over in Scripture—can be found in the smallness of a twig or branch. If we have the eyes to see it.

What this passage in Zechariah emphasizes is that in the Servant Branch there is now a *new reality*, a new hope that we are tasked with rooting ourselves in. Because when we root ourselves in this reality—in the reality of what is being presented here, the reality of the gospel—*then* we experience a new kind of growth because our wounds finally find actual hope and healing in Jesus.

And over and over, examples keep coming up that remind us of how important it is to be rooted in this reality.

I'm not sure how many of you are familiar with the popular Christian writer and speaker, Philip Yancey, but he's been in the news a bunch this past week due to a public confession that he made to Christianity Today regarding an affair that he's been having with someone over the last 8 years.

And I think for many of us, it's very easy—when we hear about another famous Christian figure making a moral mistake—it's very easy for us to be angry at the impact this has, not just on the global church, but on the 'outside' world looking in. It's very easy to read the news and think, 'Oh dear Lord, not another one.' It's very easy to criticize and condemn and be appropriately upset.

But Philip Yancey is not any holier than you and I. If a high priest could come before God with soiled clothing, then you better believe that the rest of us look pretty bad too.

What must always be remembered is that no one is bereft of the need for grace. The man who wrote the most well-known book on grace is ironically the one who feels the most in need of it.

As he said himself, he literally has nothing to stand on except God's grace. He has to do the hard work, now, of focusing on rebuilding trust, restoring his marriage, and pulling completely away from the public in order to spend the remainder of his life trying to live up to the words he has written.

In other words, Yancey has recognized the false identity he was living under—something that Kinkade was never able to do. Yes, his family is devasted. His wife is heartbroken and traumatized. It's humiliating. The whole Christian world feels betrayed by someone who was a trusted spiritual authority to many.

And, with the hurt, we also remember that God's mercy is bigger than all of this. If that were not the case, we would not be here. If that was not the case, there'd be no point in any of us being here.

Because those who commit great moral failures and *realize* it, they are the ones who prove the point that Scripture is trying to make. They prove that the mission of the Branch, the mission of Jesus, is the only true and healing hope that this world has.

It may seem like not enough to our overly logical minds, but it is the most powerful type of healing that God has to offer. The hope of a righteousness not our own.

We spoke last week about how creation shouts the glory of God. And I want to encourage you this week, whenever you see a branch—which I hope is a lot—to remember the Branch who brings new growth. The Branch who brings a new chapter in the story of salvation. The Branch who has clothed *you* in righteousness and has brought you hope.

Again, it may feel trivial or insignificant, but being mindful of the insignificant is what Scripture has asked us to do all along. From the moment that the prophets began to speak about the coming King, *this* was how they spoke about Him.

That He would not appear royal or magnificent. That He had no stately form or majesty that we would look at Him and think much of Him. That He was the grieving and suffering type rather than the prideful and victorious type. That He would be a twig or branch rather than a mighty oak.

That He would be born in a trough and die on a cross. That the Tree of Life would be laid *in* wood and nailed *to* wood. That the creation He made would literally cradle *Him* in both life and death.

And yet, as we sang this past week at the memorial service:

Then sings my soul, my Savior God, to Thee;
How great Thou art, how great Thou art!

Why is this so great? Why is *a Branch* so great? Because now in Him, *we* are clothed in resurrection righteousness. Yes, we are still very much a part of a broken world. But our stained attire has been taken off, and *we* are now part of the new creation and bear in ourselves signs of hope and healing.

All because the Tree of Life became a branch. The Almighty became a servant. The Creator of life became a seed that fell into the ground and died so that we could experience new life.

[So] sings my soul, my Savior God, to Thee;
How great Thou art, how great Thou art!